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Misusing the C.I.A.

In requesting the Central Intelligence Agency to declassify its report on world petroleum resources, President Carter yielded to an understandable impulse with consequences that may do him and the C.I.A. more harm than good.

It is not unusual for the C.I.A. to do studies on Soviet and Communist Chinese oil production and on other international economic subjects or for the agency to make all or part of these studies public. For at least 20 years, such declassified papers have been made available through the Commerce Department. The C.I.A. has also provided hard-to-get data, particularly on the Communist world, for annual reports by the Joint Economic Committee of Congress.

What is unusual is for a research paper to be declassified immediately after its preparation and as part of a public relations effort in behalf of a major Presidential program. Release of the C.I.A. report touched off last week's media blitz for the Carter energy program, thrusting the C.I.A. into the center of a political controversy, just where it does not belong. The publication of this report was relatively innocent

but nonetheless unfortunate. It was unfair to the C.I.A. insofar as it casts doubt on the intellectual detachment with which the information was prepared. Since the study was requested for the National Security Council at a time when the President's energy program was in preparation and since those who drafted it were unquestionably aware of the pro-conservation drift of Mr. Carter's thinking, it would have been astonishing if the report had concluded that the outlook is rosy and no conservation measures are necessary. In reality, however, the study is in line with previously published C.I.A. data. Some private experts foresee more abundant sources of petroleum becoming available as the price rises, but Adm. Stansfield Turner, the C.I.A. director, explains his agency's estimates are based on information that the Soviet Union in the next decade will shift from oil exporter to importer.

Nevertheless, the suspicion that the facts were "cooked" to fit Mr. Carter's recipe has already been published in various quarters. This suspicion would never have arisen if the report had been allowed to become public in the normal way, and without a White House imprimatur.